

Productivity missions

As the name indicates, these technical missions were set up in 1949 within the widened framework of the European Reconstruction Program (ERP, 'Marshall Plan') and had at the heart of their objective an increase in productivity.

Reflections on productivity existed in Europe from the very beginning of the 20th century, particularly concerning the evolutions of American industry. Private programs for technical assistance developed during the interwar period, in particular in France, Germany and Great-Britain, with study trips organized in the United States. Their objectives were the improvement of productivity through technological innovation and new methods for organizing production. The European ground was well prepared so as to be able to benefit from the productivity missions after the Second World War. Thus, this method was not created by the Marshall Plan, but it brought about a true social 'revolution'.

These productivity missions were created in the context of the Marshall Plan, as a European initiative. They started in 1949-50 and were at their peak in 1951-52. The programs declined from 1953 and ceased to exist in 1956. The financial effort which the Marshall Plan represented was enormous. The objectives of these missions were the organization of work, the method of planning production and the method of financial management of a company. This was the first ever systematic exchange circuit focused on productivity. The sixteen beneficiary countries of Marshall Aid were targeted by these missions, and Japan joined thereafter. The number of missions was very high: more than 180 for Italy, more than 200 for France, the same for Norway, nearly 300 for Japan. The number of participants in each mission being at least twelve, there were thus thousands of participants, senior executives, engineers, foremen, trade unionists and civil servants who could benefit from these exchanges. Moreover, these missions generated transnational exchanges between the participating countries, each of which welcomed on its soil missions coming from the rest of Europe and even from non-European countries.

On the American side, the main actor was the US Technical Assistance and Productivity Agency (USTA&P), created in 1948 within the framework of the ERP and designed to organize and subsidize the missions. On the European side, the productivity missions were not directly managed by the governments, but by other suitable organizations. In 1950, the US Congress required of European governments that they create national centres of productivity. The majority of the missions were then organized on the basis of a partnership between these centres and the national trade unions. The Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) also played a part in the coordination of the whole project, and this polycentric structure continued until the creation of the European Productivity Agency (EPA) in 1953.

Two periods are to be distinguished: from 1949 to 1952, the stress was laid on technology transfer and, secondarily, on managerial transfer; from 1953, the 'human' data of productivity reappeared, with a partial reorientation which privileged private initiative, considered to be more effective, and a limitation on financing from public funds. Three types of mission correspond to particular objectives. Short missions were initially deployed (one month), gathering ten to thirty people, mostly engineers. From 1950, missions of long duration (nine months) concerning experts were set up, starting with a formative program in a business school before paying additional visits. From 1951, there was a multiplication of short missions (three weeks), whose members were, from within the same company, representatives with an equal share of directors, executives and trade unionists, in accordance with the wishes of the Americans. This last type of mission had an important impact.

The productivity missions towards the United States, thanks to the new character of their breadth, allowed a radical change in the direction of productivity in Europe. The new state of mind caused or developed by these productivity missions accelerated the passage to a competitive market economy, which is at the origin of the 'European miracle'.

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